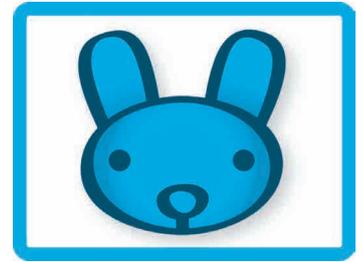


Your rabbit's welfare needs



Do you know the five key things rabbits need for a happy and healthy life?

According to the recent "Pet-Care Practices in Victoria"¹ research, many Victorian rabbit owners don't.

This research involved a survey of 1,629 dog, cat, bird and rabbit owners in Victoria. It aimed to measure how well owners understood their pets' welfare needs.

The five key welfare needs are summarised as follows:



Environment

The need for a suitable environment (place to live)



Diet

The need for a suitable diet



Behaviour

The need to express normal behaviour



Companionship

The need to live with, or apart from, other animals



Health

The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease

Welfare worries for rabbits

- Loneliness - rabbits are highly social animals, yet only 18 per cent have the company of another rabbit.
- Cramped housing and no exercise - many rabbits live in hutches that are too small for them to move comfortably. And although rabbits need at least four hours a day of exercise, only 36 per cent of rabbits are allowed out of their hutches daily. Seven per cent are never let out of their hutch at all.
- Boredom - rabbits need to dig, run and play every day. Yet 34 per cent of rabbits don't have access to toys or other objects they can manipulate, 26 per cent never receive opportunities to forage, and 25 per cent never have an opportunity to dig.
- Diet disaster - rabbits need to eat their own body weight in grass hay each day, yet 39 per cent of rabbits aren't given any hay to eat. Instead, 30 per cent of rabbits are fed rabbit muesli, which can cause dental disease and nutrient deficiencies.
- Neglected health - rabbits require vaccination, dental care, grooming, desexing and other preventative health measures. Thirty-seven per cent of owners don't vaccinate their rabbits, 36 per cent do nothing to maintain their dental health, and 35 per cent of owners don't take rabbits to the vet for a checkup.
- Hot and bothered - rabbits are extremely heat sensitive and can die from heat stress. Eighteen per cent of rabbits don't have access to a cool, shaded area when the weather is hot.

¹ Bennett, P.C., Mornement, K., & Howell, T. (2013). Pet-care practices in Victoria, 2013: a survey of bird, cat, dog and rabbit owners. Unpublished report, La Trobe University, Australia.



Top tips for rabbit owners

- Ease your rabbit's loneliness - consider getting a second rabbit for company. The best combination is a desexed male and a desexed female (but ensure you follow guidelines on safely introducing a new rabbit to your existing pet, to prevent aggression).
- Check your rabbit's hutch - is it big enough for your rabbit to lie down and stretch out in all directions? High enough so your rabbit can stand up on his or her back legs, without ears touching the roof? Long enough to allow for at least three hops from one end to the other? If not, you need to upgrade to a bigger hutch. Also ensure your rabbit has a secure exercise area that he or she can access for at least four hours a day.
- Make some simple toys for your rabbit. You can find most of the things you need already around the house. Visit the DEPI website – www.depi.vic.gov.au/pets – for lots of ideas. And don't forget that your rabbit must have daily opportunities to chew, dig, forage and run.
- Check your rabbit's diet - is your rabbit eating his or her own bodyweight in grass hay daily? This is essential for dental and digestive health. Your rabbit also needs a handful of fresh greens morning and night. Vary the greens offered. Good choices include

spinach, bok choy, cauliflower leaves, cabbage and brussel sprout leaves. Carrots and fruit should only be fed occasionally and in small quantities as treats, because they are high in sugar, and can cause obesity. And don't feed rabbits muesli – this causes dental decay and nutrient deficiencies.

- Book your rabbit in for a checkup with your vet. Your vet can advise you on vaccinations, desexing, internal/external parasite control, dental health and grooming.
- Plan ahead for next summer. When temperatures get above 28°C, you will need to move your rabbit to a cool, shaded and well ventilated area. You can also provide two-litre frozen water bottles for rabbits to rest against. Alternatively, on hot days, you can bring rabbits inside the house (even if only in the laundry).

Doing just one of these things today could make a big difference to your rabbit's life!

Learn more

Learn more about the Pet-Care Practices research results, and the welfare needs of rabbits – visit www.depi.vic.gov.au/pets



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